

24

Visual Art

INSTALLATION ART-AS-RESEARCH

◆ Ardra L. Cole and Maura McIntyre

My art has always tried to resist a position in which we're supposed to be passive consumers of culture. . . . The viewers complete the work. They're the other half of the making of meaning.

—Joseph Kosuth speaking about *The Play of the Unmentionable* installed in the Brooklyn Museum's Grand Lobby in 1990 (Putnam, 2001, p. 156)

Join us in a look at installation art as one of the many art forms that has found its way into social science research as a methodological challenge to modernist perspectives on knowledge and knowing. Our chapter is a virtual tour of several research installations including our own. Through our experiential rendering of this art form, we consider how our work and the work of other installation artist-researchers advances knowledge in unique ways, paying particular attention to the qualities of accessibility, inclusion, audience engagement, and sociopolitical commitment. During the journey we explore some issues and challenges peculiar to installation art-as-research. We also make particular reference to the role of installation art as articulated by a number of contemporary artists whose work reflects intentions and “attitude” that echo some of the qualities of installation art-as-research. We invite

you to dwell in our “thick description” of these installations and to join us in reflecting upon and theorizing the methodology.

We begin on a beach in sunny Sydney, Australia, with Marianne Hulbosch’s and Robyn Gibson’s work in the annual exhibition *Sculpture by the Sea*. From there we cross the equator and fly north into Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Patrick Slattery’s *Knowledge (De)Constructed and (Re)Embodied: An Art Installation That Disrupts Regulations of the Body in Classroom Practices* is exhibited at a conference on arts-based research. Continuing north we begin the Canadian leg of our journey in Hull, Quebec, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization where Kathryn Church’s exhibit *Fabrications: Stitching Ourselves Together* has just opened. From there we head for Sherbrooke, Quebec, and another conference to see *Living in Paradox*, a teacher education project mounted by Cole, Knowles, brown, and Buttignol. Finally, ending up on the east coast, at Pier 21 National Historic Site in Halifax we see *The Alzheimer’s Project*, our installation about caregiving. (See www.sagepub.com/knowlessupplement.)

◆ *In Your Own Backyard*

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA
(HULSBOSCH & GIBSON, 2002)

Touching Down Under you make the transition from tarmac to salt water by taking off your shoes. Walking along the spectacular coastline of the Pacific Ocean from Bondi to Tamarama Beach, you take in the beauty and drama of the incessant, rhythmic cresting and breaking of towering waves against expansive stretches of white sand. This is surfers’ paradise, and the surfers are out today in full force, riding the waves, dotting the beaches with their colorful

“boardshorts,” wetsuits, and surfing paraphernalia. As a first-time visitor to Sydney, you have noted its urban and multicultural landscape, intrigued by the blend of cultural symbols that help to form its identity. Continuing your walk you cast your eyes toward a townscape of colorful shops, restaurants, and houses at the edge of the beach. At first, you look beyond what you assume is just a line of laundry hanging in someone’s backyard. But this is no ordinary laundry line. You move closer to investigate.

A rotary clothesline is set up so as to create a boundary between urban and seascape. Hanging around the full perimeter of the line are numerous pairs of the ubiquitous boardshorts that you have come to recognize as a cultural beach-fashion icon. But these are not just any boardshorts you discover. They are made from national flags of the world—55 in all—for many of the national groups now living in Australia. You see that this is an outdoor art piece created and installed by two artist-researchers from the University of Sydney as part of a large, annual outdoor exhibition of contemporary sculpture. The installation invites viewers “to move beyond the passive spectator role and respond, engage, even touch the work” (Gibson & Hulbosch, 2007, p. 175) and contemplate their own notions of self and collective identity. It is intended to speak of the authors’ “personal, lived experiences and those of new and would-be Australians—immigrants, refugees and displaced persons who like us, felt like outsiders” (p. 174).

You like the way the researchers have aired the topic of immigration and pluralism in a public place, confronting it where it lives. You wonder how many people actually have responded to the researchers’ invitation to engage, touch, and contemplate, and how the exhibit and the issues it represents are taken up in this location of sun and surf. As you prepare to retrace your steps, you wonder about the many possible responses

to the sculpture and begin to imagine the range of conversations sparked by the presence of this work in this space.

Getting settled on the plane for another unimaginably long journey, you take out your research journal and make a few notes about what you have seen so far and how it relates to what you know about installation art and its origins.

By definition, "installation art is art made for a specific space exploiting certain qualities of that space" (Delahunt, 2007). Because one intention of much of installation art-as-research is to make research more accessible to diverse audiences including but beyond the academy, the work is exhibited in a variety of venues atypical to academic work. The interactive nature of most of the work also renders it responsive and dynamic. Each time it is exhibited in a different venue, the work is changed to suit the space.

Marcel Duchamp, with his 1917 work *Readymade*, is often considered to be the first artist to use everyday objects, usually found cast-offs, to create works of art. He did so as a statement against "the 'aura' of value and prestige that traditionally accrues to the art object" (Putnam, 2001, p. 12).

Well-known contemporary artist Martha Rosler uses art as a form of political action, to move people forward in their thinking rather than to engage them passively with an art work as a representational truth. With her installations, as with all her work, Rosler intends to challenge high art culture by moving her work out into communities and inviting everyday citizens to engage with it. She "unravel[s] conventional narrative structures and representational forms" (Alberro, 1998, p. 85) to both communicate and engage her audience on a social topic. Rosler's work is an interactive, open text where "the art is a continuous and ongoing practice, a conversation in which images, text, and fragments all take part" (p. 86). She

seeks to confuse or challenge opposites of "everyday life and high art, museum objects and art works" (p. 84). For example, as a strategy to widen the audience for art, Martha Rosler advertised her 1972 *Monumental Garage Sale* in flyers and local bulletins as an ordinary garage sale and in newspapers as an art event. Describing Martha Rosler's work, Elizabeth Macgregor and Sabine Breitweiser (1998, Foreword) state: "Accessibility has always been a major concern of hers, as is the role of the viewer in constructing the meaning of the work. She presses viewers to rethink the boundaries between the public and the private as well as the social and the political." Rosler's use of multiple forms signifies "her aspiration to reach beyond the limits of aesthetically enfranchised high art publics to a wider audience" (Alberro, 1998, p. 90).

You think about the clothesline of boardshorts near the beach and note how the researchers' choices of venue and materials combine to bring a broad sociocultural issue into the lives and thoughts of ordinary citizens. You wonder how the meaning might change in another location.

◆ *Knowledge (De)Constructed and (Re)Embodied*

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO
(SLATTERY, 2000)

Stepping into the coolness of the air-conditioned building, you welcome the relief from the intense desert sun. After your eyes adjust to the dim light, you follow directional signs pointing the way to an exhibition space. Partway there you hear the haunting sounds of melodious religious chanting. As you approach the open exhibit

area, a contemporary protest song, *Take the Power Back*, competes with the harmonic voices of the Monks of Taize. You feel unsettled by the contrast and curious to know more. At the entrance to the installation *Knowledge (De)Constructed and (Re)Embodied*, a disclaimer is posted warning you that you are about to be exposed to religious, violent, and sexual images that may disturb you. “In an educational research conference?” you think. You enter the area that has been transformed into a Catholic junior high school classroom of the 1960s. The exhibit, you discern, is a critical representation of the regulation and oppression of the adolescent body by religious institutions. Using an array of artifacts, visual images, and religious symbols and icons, the artist-researcher has recreated a monastic atmosphere.

Candles and incense burn on a makeshift altar fashioned from a wooden classroom bench, and you are invited to view the exhibit while kneeling on an antique Catholic confessional *prie-dieu*. You decline. A 1962 sixth-grade Baltimore Catholic catechism pictures a comparison of holy lifestyles with the word “best” inscribed under the drawing of angelic celibate priests and nuns. Part of the exhibit titled *10,000 Ejaculations* depicts images from the artist-researcher’s own childhood catechism. You learn that ejaculations are short and spontaneous prayers that the nuns instructed students to call out in times of temptation. In another part of the installation juxtapositions of sexual and religious symbols invite the viewer to reexperience the confusion and guilt of adolescence. Nude male and female bodies are partially covered with communion wafers that you could easily remove if you chose to. Knowing that you are in a public place, you suppress the urge. You smile at the clever way the artist-researcher has drawn you in to illustrate the theme of the piece.

An old, wooden school desk holds textbooks and personal memorabilia. A decorated greeting card—a spiritual bouquet—from the child artist-researcher to his mother

lists a quantity of prayer offerings. A calendar and photograph of a young man masturbating are “hidden” under the desk. The desk and surrounding floor are littered with communion hosts doubling as globs of semen. In the bottom corner of the desk is a cardboard artwork completed by the researcher’s father on the morning of his death by suicide.

The weight and pain of the installation are almost too much to bear. Even though the work is explicitly based in the artist-researcher’s own experience, you know that it speaks of the experiences of many. With this in mind, and your physical response to the work settling deep in your body, you leave the exhibit longing for the warmth and light of the out-of-doors.

Some time alone with your notebook in the bland surroundings of the plane en route to your next destination helps you process the intensity of this experience.

Using salvaged objects, artists Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz also constructed and displayed freestanding, full-size sculptures of reconstructed spaces, human forms, and assemblages. Their bold cultural and political statements about societal conditions and contradictions rely on human inclinations toward voyeurism; they often coerce the viewer to become an active participant in the representation. Says Harten (1996, p. 45),

For Edward and Nancy Kienholz, to be committed through art means to engage the beholder too—to surprise a person with an artistic device much as with a hello, and then to draw that person in . . . and better still to force the viewer to a position of self-identification.

Part of the power of the Kienholz’s art is in the demands it makes on the audience. As Ross (1996) says:

It is not the work’s shocking truthfulness or the artists’ willingness to explore

intricate and delicate societal issues, nor is it merely their ability to create extreme dramatic impact through the use of assembled found objects. The Kienholz' works are forever lodged in our memory because they remain fresh wounds, scars that will never heal. (p. 22)

You ponder the Catholic school room and how the artist so effectively drew you in to experience the work. You can still feel it in your body.

According to Ruskin (1996), Kienholz's

realism is our collective fears and the social responsibility from which [they] will not allow us to escape. . . . We are invited to judge our present social condition and then we are begged, through a visual scream, to create another reality, one which celebrates human dignity. (pp. 42, 43)

You think about the power of the work you have just seen and try to recall the last academic journal article that had a comparable impact. This search occupies your thoughts for the remainder of the flight. Upon landing you still haven't come up with an answer. You wonder how many people visited the exhibit and how they were affected by it. You think about the artist-researcher and wonder about his vulnerability.

◆ *Fabrications*

HULL, QUEBEC (CHURCH, 1999)

Arriving at the Museum of Civilization, you are wowed by the grandeur of the place and the prestige of the venue. This is an internationally acclaimed museum and social science research as installation art is on display! Overcome by the feeling of quiet reverence

that seems to envelop you in aesthetically constructed spaces, you are already in a contemplative mood when you emerge into the gallery that displays Church's work.

A collection of wedding dresses is displayed individually and, occasionally, in groups. The bodily form of a simple mannequin mounted on a sturdy wooden base animates each dress. You smile at the weathered white picket fences that protect the dresses from the curious hands of the general public. You wonder at the choice of barrier and feel certain that it was carefully chosen to convey a series of meanings that relate to the dresses and the institution of marriage—properness, domesticity, and property. Reading only the titles you struggle to keep your promise to save the detailed text panels for later.

The colors are appropriate—pastel backdrops that speak of traditional femininity, shades of white and ivory that connote various degrees of purity. The textures of silks and satins make your skin yearn for contact; the crinkled lace makes you flinch. Associated wedding day paraphernalia, such as an eyelet veil and lace-covered, spike-heeled ankle boots accompany some of the gowns. Several exercise books with drawings of the dresses and the seamstress's notes look clearly like original artifacts. By the time you encounter a reproduction of the sewing room, complete with wood paneling, TV, and plush toys, your guess is confirmed that one woman made all the dresses in the cracks between her responsibilities to her own family.

The lighting, dimmer than you expected, serves to create a mood of ambiguity. The disembodied dresses are highly evocative, at times almost eerie. The atmosphere is not simply jolly and celebratory; the dresses somehow emanate a fuller story than anticipation, artistry, and beauty. You wonder at the story behind the dress behind each woman behind the artist/seamstress. You are aware that the dresses are not ordered chronologically and are curious about what narrative the overall

shape of the exhibit tells. You are awed by the magnitude of the exhibit in its entirety, the fragility of the dresses, the weight of the associated materials (like the wooden picket fences) and both the simplicity and the complexity of the exhibit's conceptualization.

Heading back to the station to catch the train for the next stop on the tour you find yourself looking forward to the in-between time of travel as a space of sense-making.

Richard Jackson (1996, p. 283), a life-long friend of contemporary American assemblage artist Edward Kienholz, concisely summarizes the power and possibility of installation art in/as research. "The thing I like about Ed [Kienholz] and Nancy's [Reddin Kienholz] art," he says, "is that it's real democratic. It doesn't take a Ph.D. to understand it. So it kind of spoke to everyone. Not highbrow or exclusive."

You think about how the wedding dress exhibit brings the invisible labor of the artist/seamstress out of the basement work room and into full view of a public audience, who can immediately connect with the familiarity of the display and be challenged, perhaps for the first time, to think about some of the sociocultural complexities depicted. You also are mindful of the technical and logistical complexities of the project and long to talk about the process with the artist-researcher (see Church's discussion of Fabrications in Chapter 35 of this volume).

◆ *Living in Paradox*

SHERBROOKE, QUEBEC
(COLE, KNOWLES,
BROWN, & BUTTIGNOL, 1999)

Arriving in Sherbrooke you dodge the conference registration and head straight to the installation. Halfway across the expansive foyer of the building your attention is

grabbed once again by the haunting sounds of melodious chanting that leads you to an altar. This time the recreated setting is a university instead of a junior high school classroom. Carefully placed on a cloth-covered table are burning candles and a black mortarboard. Behind the altar painted on two large canvases are familiar symbols—a blackboard covered with faint traces of erased words, an office door with appointment schedule and posted notices to students, an ivy-covered wall. A chronology of academic garb—school uniforms of different sizes and an academic gown—hangs on pegs under the sign "Men's Room." You smile at the subtle statement. All of this is backdrop to the centerpiece of the assemblage. Lined up on an electrically driven conveyor belt are several tiny, white, satin pillows that laboriously climb their way to the altar. You feel a stabbing pang of recognition as though the symbols positioned on the pillows and passing before your eyes are of your own life: a torn family photograph, gold wedding band, empty pill bottle, ticking clock, money, and on it goes. You recognize the sacrifices religiously made at the altar of the academy. You are mesmerized by the rhythmic movement and sound of the conveyor belt, the monks' voices, and another familiar chant that, for a moment, you think is coming from your own inner voice. In contrast to the beautiful and harmonious male voices are the recorded, spoken words of rationalization—"But I love my work. I really, really love my work." "Too close to home," you think as you walk a few feet away to another part of the exhibit.

A Perfect Imbalance is a simple balance scale. Your curiosity is immediately aroused because, although the scales seem balanced, the items on each side of the scale are clearly unmatched. A small sign invites you to try to balance the scale. Knowing that achieving balance between the personal and professional sides of your life has always been an

elusive pursuit, you decide to try. You top-ple the high tower of blocks from one side of the scale. Each foam block is labeled to represent a different activity or role required of professors of teacher education (teaching, service, professional development, community development, in-service education, family, recreation, exercise, etc.). From the other side you remove a single, much heavier, multifaceted block labeled with activities the university deems most meritorious. You catch on. You know that, according to the values and standards of the university, activities that have mainly local or personal implications and that demand inordinate time and energy do not carry much weight. The heavy weights from the university's perspective are those activities that result in intellectual and financial prestige and international acclaim. You know that the scales will only balance when the entire pile of blocks defining teacher educators' work is in place. As you replace the last block at the top of the teetering tower, you reflect on how imperfect the balance really is.

A miniature version of a wrestling arena is set up on a nearby table. A toy wrestling ring sits in the middle of a simulated set of bleachers filled with jeering onlookers. Standing menacingly in the middle of the ring are three World Wrestling Federation-syndicated toy action figures. Up against the ropes, appearing vulnerable but in a defiant pose, is a much smaller female figure. Poignant narrative excerpts are projected onto the spot-lit and smoke-filled painted backdrop of the arena. More phrases are written on the bleacher-like supports. "The academy, as a bastion of patriarchy built on norms and values of rugged individualism, competition, and hierarchy, is an adverse arena for many women faculty members" says the descriptive statement, under the title *Wrestling Differences*, posted nearby. "Amen," you mutter as you finish reading and turn away, aware of your strong emotional response to the work.

You notice that the foyer has filled with people and set off for a bite to eat and to think some more about what you have just seen and experienced.

Graeme Sullivan, in his book *Art Practice as Research* (2005), describes visual art exhibitions as sites of inquiry and learning where "meaning can be seen to take place through enactment and action. . . . The learning space disrupts distinctions among artist-objects, viewer-audience, and time-space, such that the encounter is direct and engaging." "This reflexive encounter," he says, is a form of "performative interpretation" (p. 210).

Claes Oldenburg, who created a series of works from found and altered objects wrote, "I am for art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum" (quoted in Putnam, 2001, p. 13).

Reworking this quote you add "and for research accounts that do more than gather dust on a shelf!"

Feeling rejuvenated once again through time spent in quiet reflection and contemplation, you set off for the train station and the final stop on the research tour.

◆ *The Alzheimer's Project*

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA
(COLE & MCINTYRE, 2003)

The moist sea air of a port city infuses your pores with life as you step off the train and head toward Pier 21 National Historic Site. Located on the harbor front of Halifax, the building was gateway to Canada for over a million immigrants between 1928 and 1971. The restored building is now a museum and tribute to those people. *The Alzheimer's Project* occupies an expansive space outside the main exhibit hall. You remember that installations displayed "outside"

permanent museum or gallery collections are called “museum interventions” (Kosuth, in Putnam, 2001). Their purpose is to provide a commentary on the permanent collection or to “refresh” the permanent display. Typically displayed in museum entrance halls or large, “non-art” spaces, these installations, often arresting in their subject matter or form, capture the attention of passersby, thus broadening the audience beyond the usual museum or gallery patrons.

A large Plexiglas sign grabs your attention: “*The Alzheimer’s Project.*” A floral arrangement on an adjacent table invites you to take a closer look. You stop at the table to look over information about the display, about Alzheimer’s disease, and about the artist-researchers and their work. A fact sheet positioned on a small easel reveals some startling statistics about Alzheimer’s disease.

Your curiosity is piqued when you look to your left and see three freestanding refrigerator doors arranged in chronological order, each reminiscent of a different era. The front of each door is partially covered with photographs secured by magnets. “Just like my fridge at home,” you think to yourself as you step closer. You study the black and white images on the first door and see snapshots of a young mother and daughter—baby, toddler, adolescent—involved in a variety of everyday activities. You study the images long enough to get a sense that the relationship depicted looks quite ordinary. You move to the next fridge and notice that some years have passed: The refrigerator door is more modern, the images are in color, and mother and daughter are older. You see snapshots of two adult women enjoying life and each other. You take in the story told and feel like you are almost part of it. You move on to the third and final door and immediately realize that the mood of the story has changed and that the

characters in the story have switched roles. Daughter is now feeding, bathing, and caring for mother whose illness is very apparent. You step back and do a visual sweep to read the relationship narrative laid out before you. You pause to reflect, looking out over the calm waters of the harbor, and then walk along a few steps further.

A short distance away you spot a series of large black and white photographs of another mother–daughter relationship, As your eyes sweep from left to right you read a visual narrative across a life span—mother holding newborn baby to baby-now-adult holding ill mother. On a table beneath the photographs is a set of eight small handmade books, each resting on an individual stand. It seems that they are meant to be read so you pick one up. On each page, in hand-printed, silver lettering, is written one or a few words. You savor each word, slowly turning each page. Each book tells a different relationship story, of the intimacy of human connection. As you replace the last book on its stand, you pause to look again at the photographs.

The partition has two sides, and so you move to see a set of eight large framed photographs hanging in a row. The matted and framed black and white photographs appear normal from a distance. As you step up to them, however, you realize that the images appear out of focus. A closer look reveals that there is another image superimposed on each that is creating a distortion and obscuring your view. It is a transparent image of an aging and ill woman with a vacant, gaunt look. Her haunting eyes draw you in, fix your gaze. It is difficult to get past that look, to see beyond to the background image. When you do, you see a little girl in old-fashioned attire standing in what might be the backyard of her home. The next image, also overshadowed by the ill woman, is of a young woman perhaps in her late teens.

With chin resting on crossed hands she leans over a high fence, a piece of straw clenched in her broad, confident smile. You fill out the rest of the story in your mind. Each image captures a moment in a woman's life as she grows through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, motherhood, and grandmotherhood. This is herstory but you have difficulty keeping it in focus; the ill woman commands your attention.

As you reach the end of the partition, you encounter another image of an aging and ill woman; this one is larger than life and affixed to a mirror suspended less than a meter above the floor. She is obviously in an institutional context, and you recognize that same steady gaze demanding your attention. As you respond to her demand, you realize that you have entered the picture. Beside her image you see your own reflection. You pause to take it in. Herstory/Yourstory the title says. You wonder.

A full-sized clothesline of undergarments intrigues you. You move closer and slowly walk its length. You trace the line of laundry from baby's diaper to lace garter belt to multihooked brassiere to adult diaper. The over-washed, white, female undergarments mark the shift in personal power and changing nature of dependence across a life span. You are tempted to move closer to the adorable baby's undershirt to see if it smells like powder; you giggle to yourself as you imagine slipping away to try on the padded push-up bra; you groan as you recognize the full-size nylon panties with the elastic waistband slightly stretched; and you pause in silence in front of the adult size diaper hanging heavily at the end of the life line. A small basket of tiny, brightly colored clothespins sits on a small table at the end of the clothesline. You choose one, pin it to your lapel in a gesture of solidarity, and continue.

Off to your right you spot a warm and inviting scene—a welcome respite from the

emotional intensity of the earlier pieces. Three vintage card tables and folding chairs are clustered around a bright red, wool rug with a large heart at its centre. "Loving Care" the sign reads. You notice that a couple seated at one of the tables is hovered over a Scrabble™ game: C-A-R-E; L-O-V-E; R-E-L-A-X; S-O-F-T. You catch on to the theme. Another table is set up with pencils and tear-off pads of word puzzles. "Why not?" you think to yourself as you pull out a chair and take a seat close to the full dish of candy.

At the final piece you are met with an invitation to: *Help us Remember. . . Leave a memory (a poem, story, picture, memento, etc.) about caregiving.* You see a corkboard and cloth-covered table set up to collect and display memories of care and caregiving. Affixed to the corkboard and within a memory box and scrapbook are photographs, recipes, poems, scribbled reminders, torn fragments of notes and letters from different people and places. The objects on the table—a doll, a string of beads, a Wandering Registry bracelet—give you pause. You remember your Aunt Min and start thinking about a memento that you might bring back to add to the collection. For the time being you open the journal and write her name.

You think back to the beginning of the tour and how much you have traveled and taken in; you have the strange sensation that the entire experience has been etched in your psyche/body/spirit. Feeling inspired and provoked, you wonder at how you will integrate this experience into your own academic work. Like Rosler, who looked "for ways to bend the frames of the art world, slip past its boundaries, and fill its silences" (Alberro, 1998, p. 85), and Kienholz and Reddin Kienholz, who "believed passionately that art should be accessible to everyone" (Brooks & Hopps, 1996, p. 115), these artist-researchers in the academic realm have similar aspirations. Beginning to reflect on

some possibilities for your own work, you start a list of questions and issues to follow up on:

- *How do the researchers manage the practical issues of time and portability, not to mention finding materials and actually constructing the pieces?*
- *What about funding? What kind of support is available for this kind of research?*
- *Is it actually considered to be research? How might a research-based installation “count” in terms of academic merit?*
- *What might a proposal for one of these projects look like, especially the methodological rationale?*
- *What about the creative process? How did each of the pieces unfold?*
- *What is it like for the researchers to see their work on public display? Is it different from a published article?*
- *And what about vulnerability? Are there particular ethical concerns associated with using installation in research?*

You know that many more questions will emerge over the next few days as you continue to think back over the tour. Right now, the hour is late and your mind and body crave rest.

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